



Freeway advisory team wants Gila participation

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Ahwatukee Foothills residents will get a chance next year to read for themselves how the proposed South Mountain Freeway will impact everything from people to water to animals. The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) is working on a draft environmental impact statement that will also include air quality and other issues, said Tim Tait, community relations project manager for ADOT.

The South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, as well as the public, will be able to see the draft in 2008, and offer input that Tait said can shape the final document.

"There will be lots of opportunity to review and comment on it," he said.

The advisory team has asked that the study include information on how the proposed freeway would specifically impact the heat island effect and cultural resources in Ahwatukee, among other things.

They also say they wish ADOT had not already started the document before they had finished their recommendations.

Team member Sandy Bahr of Arizona's Sierra Club said it made her feel like the team has "very little impact on the outcome." Bahr urged ADOT to discuss the heat island effect, a phenomenon where pavement increases urban temperatures.

"That's certainly a big problem for us in the Phoenix area," she said.

Some members of the advisory team want more input from the Gila River Indian Community before they decide whether to support the proposed South Mountain Freeway or oppose it.

The freeway would run along Pecos Road and cut through South Mountain Park, connecting to Interstate 10 at 55th Avenue.

Advisory team member Michael Goodman said retail centers and other developments being planned on the reservation will impact traffic along the proposed freeway.

"To talk about traffic you really need to know what's being built," Goodman said. "All those things add up. I want it to be formally on record that they were asked to be an active member."

A retail project is planned south of Pecos Road at 40th Street and a new, larger Lone Butte Casino will replace the Rock Solid concrete plant on Kyrene Road south of the Santan Freeway.

ADOT has reserved two seats on the advisory group for Gila River representatives, but it's been awhile since anyone from the group has attended as a committee member, Tait said.

Gila reservation resident Nathaniel Percharo of the Pecos Road/I-10 Landowners Association has not attended recently due to an illness, said Alia Maisonet, community public information officer for the Gila River Indian Community. Percharo could not be reached for comment.

The second seat, reserved for a Gila resident from District 4, has been vacant, Tait said.

Maisonet said earlier this week that she told a representative from the Pecos Road/I-10 Landowners Association that the advisory group wanted someone from the nation to attend a meeting.

Because the team consists of private residents and not government officials, the nation cannot mandate that representatives attend, she said.

However, Maisonet said the issue is important to her community. A Gila River technical team is talking about transportation issues, but not focusing on South Mountain right now, she said.

"Absolutely it will impact us," she said. "Our position so far is we're not going to have this freeway on our land."

The Tribal Council adopted a resolution in 2004 saying that the freeway cannot go on reservation land, Maisonet said.

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